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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides a transcript of a videotaped roundtable discussion on recognition for learning in adult literacy programs in Canada. Participants discussed the need to provide credentials for learners who have acquired various "chunks" of learning. Recognition was thought to be a motivator for adults even if they did not need the credentials for the job market. At the same time, panelists expressed concern about the credibility of credentials and credentialing agencies and wished for a simple, unified system so that employers would understand what a credential meant. Some form of a four-level system, recognition from basic literacy to advanced high school, was proposed. As a model, the literacy program in the Manchester (England) Open College Federation was examined briefly. (KC)

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# RECOGNITION OF LEARNING IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

## Roundtable

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June, 1991

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## ROUND TABLE #1

**Stan Jones**

Well, I think there are a number of issues accreditation needs to be concerned with before we have a useful accreditation system...I'd like to list some of the things that have come to us in looking at literacy including looking at the national literacy survey in which I was a participant. One of things we find is that literacy is not a single problem. There are a whole bunch of different things that are problems that come up under literacy. So, I think that any single solution to a single test that provides accreditation is likely to be a non-solution to the problem simply because there isn't one problem out there.

A second issue that very much concerns me is the time it seems to take for people to get recognition for their learning. One of the things that I think we know about adult learners is that immediate recognition is very important in learning and a system which depends on studying for a test that can be taken only after four years of study or a sequence of courses that require you to complete in four years before you can get even the most minimal recognition, doesn't recognize that need among adult learners for early, frequent and very practical kind of recognition of their learning.

A third issue that I'm concerned about in looking in some of the accreditation programs, particularly ones that come from the US, is that they don't seem to be very learner centred. They seem to be that people who are in the know have made the decision about what learners ought to know and create a system where learners move through their system rather than a system that asks learners what learners think they need to know and help them to define what it is they're going to get recognition for.

So, I think this goes with university programs is that there is a diversity of learners and a diversity of needs out there and any system of recognition of learning has to be sensitive to the diversity of needs and the diversity of learners and the different things they want to be recognized for.

**Glen Farrell**

I'd like to begin if you like by giving you something of the sense of where I'm coming from so far as my view about the development of educational policy in a more general sense - some of the principles that I think need

to guide our thinking about the evolution of educational systems and essentially I think there are two critical issues. One is that we need at all levels to view learning as a life long process. And, secondly, we ought to view learning in its natural state, if I can put it that way, from the learners point of view as a seamless process.

I don't think, by and large, our educational systems historically have been characterized in that way. They've largely...the structures that we have set up have largely assumed that education learning is in chronological terms a front and loaded exercise i.e. it's for the young and in the guidance of public policy in spite of the growing rhetoric about the need to recognize learning as a life long process, I think the development of public policy, really across Canada, is largely lacking in the implementation of that view. But, at least, as a life long adult educator from a career point of view, I see it as encouraging that the rhetoric is starting.

Seamless - I mean in the sense of the natural progression of people being able to build on the skills, the knowledge, the concepts that they acquire in whatever way. Whether that be acquired in the context of a formal learning experience or for most of us who acquire what we know what we're able to do and in a non-formal learning environment that, whatever we want to pursue, ought to I think, be recognized and built upon as opposed to what we more frequently do and that's asking people to go back and reinvent the wheel or back to square one or however one wants to start that.

#### Maurice Taylor

From that background, a couple of issues that I see surfacing are, first of all, I think we have to address a new definition of literacy for the work force. I think some of our programs have been geared to a particular way of viewing literacy and I think it's time now, from an employee point of view, and from an employer point of view and from a union point of view to examine that definition of literacy.

Another issue I'd like to speak about and discuss is the whole idea of developing basic skills profiles for employees. I think that if we can conceptualize a basic skills profile then it may be one way of actually viewing certification.

Thirdly, I think there are some very exciting initiatives going on in the UK and the United States and in Canada that we could learn some lessons from and I'd like to share my opinions about those lessons.

Another concern that I have been thinking about is if we're going to be talking about articulation or accreditation, it engenders also a debate on credibility. I think there are some lessons that we can learn from other industrialized countries. I think as bodies develop and issue certificates, sometimes that's very confusing to employers and I'm going to focus my concerns from the work environment. If we have a number of agencies that are going to be offering a number of certificates, the employer becomes very confused as to what those certificates or what that system of accreditation means. So, credibility, in my opinion, is coupled with the issue of accreditation.

#### John Sanders

I think the partnerships is one of the key areas and an attractive nature of that and for that partnership to work effectively, I think you, also, need to, kind of, go back to an earlier word you used, which is brokerage. Bring some body or some neutral form to bring people together where they can explore issues of mutual concern and try and identify some of the key areas for development of skills right across the board, not just in work but, also, in a community based setting.

I think we found that one of the functions which the Open College has taken on has been that brokerage, neutral, meeting ground, sort of role, which is not the thing which was exactly planned in a conscience way, but has certainly developed over the eight years we've been in place.

I think we always have credibility as one of these sort of key words within our considerations. We look to develop credibility organically; develop mentally which is not a thing which we can deliver by force of rhetoric or by simple statements, or by advocacy. It is through practice and through gradual developments of people actually going out with the credits; with the credibility of the organization behind them and engaging with other people whether it be personnel officers, whether it be other tutors in further education and training. The learners within this system ultimately will underpin your credibility. It's the same sort of thing which the Open University at a higher level in Britain found itself with. But, initially, there was fears towards the credibility of the awards which this new organization was giving. It was only through the obvious achievements of those people and then taking those achievements into the market place, and selling them to employers, and personnel officers that the credibility of those awards, you know, was achieved and is now on a par with all other awards of that level. So, we've give ourselves a reasonable time span to achieve all we want to achieve on the credibility side.

### Stan Jones

When I think about recognition of learning and accreditation and all of that, I think about seniors in literacy programs because whatever they learn is liable not to be used to impress anybody else for any purpose. They're probably not going to use it to get into a job; they're not going to use it to get into further education. But they deserve recognition and they want recognition for what they have done. A system that recognizes the kind of learning that's appropriate for them and the purposes they're there for, I think,... just think about seniors and you begin to think about accreditation and recognition in a different way. It's recognition of learning that's taken place, not of something for somebody to do something with.

### John Sanders

I think I would endorse that wholeheartedly, from our perspective, that we see the recognition and accreditation being for a whole variety of purposes. On my desk, last week, was a moderation report for Painting for Pleasure class in a local community centre which included credit for a student...93 year old student for her work in finger painting. That was a tremendous thing to see and that person values those credits but they're not going to use them for any ulterior purpose. We can very much see the credits being for a variety of purposes. The starting point and the bottom line is often for people themselves - something for me - recognition which is, often for the first time, can have a tremendous instrumental value but not necessarily directly. It may be to widen horizons; to give people an idea of where they might go on to rather than having a directly instrumental value.

### Glen Farrell

In terms of my own philosophy and values about education, I couldn't agree more. But, let me play the devil's advocate, for a moment, because if you look at that issue from the standpoint of a public policy maker and you realize that there are costs, and you realize that the end product of that is, you know, in the case of seniors, it's a tough sell. Where's the productivity? Where's the bang for the buck? In times, which I think are with us for a long time, of restraint around public sector funding of education, it's a much more difficult thing to argue. I think, if you can put the models in place, for the reasons that we were talking about earlier, then they're simply there and available to everyone. So, it may not be an issue.

### Maurice Taylor

Building on what John has just described, I think there are some lessons that we can learn here in Ontario from some of the current work going on in the UK and one of those lessons is the fact that there are accreditation frameworks seem to be based on units and elements within units that have specific criterium performance outcomes. Building on what Stan was mentioning, if we go that route of certifying small chunks of learning, then those elements in a unit then become certifiable so that you could have a ladder of learning over a life time.

### Arthur Bull

Any other comments or questions?

### Stan Jones

Just one question. We recently brought up the notion of criterium and that, of course, is that it leads to - how do you certify each of these chunks? And, if only to lead on to other things we might talk about, I know that there are a number of schemes which involve the learner very centrally in deciding how that particular skill is going to be assessed and evaluated and credited so that the learner has a...one of the things that this does is, it gives a learner a much...provides for a way in which the learner can have a much more central role in assessing and accrediting his or her own learning. And, in fact, if the scheme is done, I think, quite properly, you don't need to create a test at all. You just need to enable the person to do things in every day life and bring them in and put them on the table and you've got the accreditation there. The postcard is accredited by bringing in post cards and greeting cards have been sent out. You don't have to have a test that does that. Except if I sell a test but, you didn't hear me say that. I don't make a mark in selling these things.

It seems to me that a crucial part is that it makes it...one of the problems we have in literacy is putting the content that's familiar to the learner so we're not testing stuff they don't know about and get them to bring it in from their own life. The contents... appropriate. It's real. It isn't made up for that purpose.

### John Sanders

That leads me onto two other words which are appropriate in our context, which are involvement and empowerment. One of the key things we have seen to be on (...) is to try and give more power to the learners and give more power to the people on the ground to determine the curriculum, determine the appropriate assessment method, and to help determine the accreditation framework which is evolved. I think that element has helped to build it up from the ground. There are lots of initiatives in the UK at the moment which are (...) initiations and something like the Open College Federation which is actually, locally and regionally based, and has strong community links, is seeking to meet those and to have means of accessing to and progression for students into those but, I think there is always the need to actually begin by asking the learners, and asking the people that work with the learners, what they think, what they see as a relevant context?

I know some research which is currently going on in one of the universities in England about progression of people within urban colleges. It produced some interesting answers about peoples motivations for the use of urban colleges as a model of a triangle of personal developments on the one side - educational developments and vocational developments.

### John Sanders

Manchester Open College Federation is literally what it says it is. It is a federation of organizations and providers in the Manchester region. It started in the city of Manchester and moved from that to include... to encompass the wider Manchester metropolitan region - something in the order of two million people in that region. It is a federation which involves providers and organizations who have an interest in the education and training of adults and was designed in many senses to break down some of artificial barriers which there were in the UK between different sectors of education training to try to bring together further education...adult education to community based people...people from higher education and, also, involve a range of organizations from employers and trade union perspectives who had an interest in the future development of adult education and training.

So, it is essentially a network and it does two main things. It does not provide courses and programs itself. It provides an accreditation service for courses and programs which are developed by people in the field - both in formal college systems but, also, in community

based providers in local community groups and in a range of adult education centres. So, it accredits courses and programs which are submitted to it as one key function and accredits the learners recognizing the learning which individual learners achieve on those courses and programs.

So, at the moment, there are something like 700 courses and programs which we accredit. A large number of which are in the adult basic education field and they range from further education college based programs - often very substantial - almost full time or three or four day week programs through to workshop based programs, flexible learning programs, community based evening class type programs plus a range of adult basic education provision in prisons for special purposes - for people with physical handicaps and disabilities; for people with a history of mental illness and a range of English as a second language provision as well.

So, it's a wide range and quite a diverse range of provision. In establishing the ABE end, if you want, of the Open College system, I was and the people in the field were particularly concerned to respect that diversity - to set up a system which would be rigorous and comprehensive. It would also allow for diversity and would allow for people to build upon the work that they were doing not to have accreditation hanging like a heavy weight over the class or program but something we could naturally evolve out of it and wouldn't destroy the ethos and the spirits and the philosophy which underpin the program.

So, the earlier work was actually working very closely with the people in the field - talking with the practitioners with the groups of learners about how this can be done; how we can try to have the best of both worlds and use creatively the tension between flexibility and rigor. I think that has been one of the key features and that's been one of the key tensions which we're always brought up against within our system.

It has been, I think, a highly successful development within Manchester and it's one which has been replicated now in different parts of the country in Open College Federations in a number of the urban regions within the UK. But, also now, we're increasing also in rural areas as well. It's worth stressing that the Open College Federation developments have been very much from more the grassroots from the local and regional perspective widening out into a national perspective.

We have a full level system which essentially ranges from basic skills and literacy, numeracy and oracy and some basic coping survival type skills at level one through

to level four which is skills and abilities which people need to be able to move on, for example, into further professional training or into higher education. We would see at level one as essentially being, in short-hand terms, basic skills and level two as being the application of those basic skills and new context and independently and the development of new skill areas. Level three being for further development in all of those but very much looking at the beginnings of and the developments of analytical and research skills; being able to take ideas and concepts from elsewhere and apply them to a body of knowledge or a range of abilities. And, level four being the application of those analytical, evaluative skills in real concepts producing, perhaps, more extended pieces of work, more defined skills and abilities and artifacts, which show that process of synthesis and analysis, as well. And, essentially, we seek to bring into that full level system a whole range of different learning programs not simply within A - B but in a whole range of vocational, non-vocational areas.

We have general level descriptives for those four levels but rely, essentially, upon people on the ground - the practitioners - to define those levels in different disciplinaries and those very interested in some of the seeming parallels between that and the British Columbia articulation scheme which, I mean, in our system, relies very heavily upon the people on the ground; the people who not only know their subjects, but know their students and their learners and bring in those people together across some of the different sectors of adult continuing education as being one of the benefits, one of the wider benefits of a network system, like which, we operate.

#### Glen Farrell

So, what I'm going to describe in terms of the B.C. articulation project, I think, is an example of how across this country in different provinces you get very different approaches that impact on matters of cost because cost is dependent on how much infrastructure may already be in place when you come along to introduce a new initiative.

If you look at the way, again, educational systems have developed with their traditional, historical emphasis on young people, and so forth, we had a elementary secondary system training as we define it in terms of vocational, technical kind of training. It's largely left to the apprenticeship approach and guilds and that sort of thing and we established universities in the assumption that people would, sort of, branch after grade 12 or finishing grade 10 or whatever level and go either on to quote "higher" education or into the work place and some form apprenticeship, perhaps. Or, perhaps, just basically working at unskilled employment.

Over the years, of course, we saw other sorts of institutional models develop in terms of colleges and vocational institutes of one kind or another that tended then to focus on other approaches to job preparation that didn't necessarily involve the universities.

In British Columbia, in the mid-60's, we saw then the evolution of a community college system on a regional basis - 15 colleges throughout the province. Active in each of those colleges was an adult education component called "continuing education" or "community education" or whatever. You have to keep in mind that the K to 12 system, the school system until very, very recently really didn't cater to adults. Nineteen was determined as something of the magic age. And, so, for those people who didn't acquire basic skills, and what was judged to be the normative age, were pretty much on their own as it were in terms of having a second chance, if you like.

And, so, quite naturally through the adult educators working in this newly evolved community college system, we saw a substantial approach develop because, in many respects, even though the school districts, through their continuing efforts, were trying to make it possible for people to go back to school and earn their high school certificate, it was determined that a lot of adults weren't very comfortable going back into that formal environment. So, very rapidly, we had a situation develop and I'd like to read from something called the "AB Articulation Report" which really lead to the articulation project as a description of what resulted as a consequence of that sort of evolution. "Over the years, many different kinds of programs have evolved under the rubric of adult basic education. These programs have been labelled differently according to such factors as the kind of institution offering the program; the funding source and the certification ultimately received. There are over thirty institutions in the province offering ABE courses and between them they have generated many different titles". That will give you some feel for the situation as it existed in 1983 which was the time that the report from which I've just quoted was done.

So, the adult educators, concerned particularly with adult basic education, came together and said, "Gee, isn't there some way that we can put together a more coherent process here from the learners point of view" still respecting and, in deed, encouraging the diversity of delivery that is evident in the thirty different types

of providers. So, that agreement was struck. I'll abbreviate here and what they agreed upon was the need to establish a four level program for adults that would begin with foundation skills, if you like, focusing essentially on numeracy, in english, broadly defined and moving through to the diploma level, which would result in the ministry of what is now called Advanced Education Training and Technology issuing a province-wide diploma which is really the GED where student's could, following this four level route, master the content that was necessary and that could be awarded at the provincial level. And, as students would achieve, at the fundamental level or the two intermediate levels, the institution or organization that would offer the training could award certificate for that sort of thing. They then created, essentially, discipline based committees...sub-groups to work on the identification of the particular kinds of competencies that needed to be mastered at each of these levels. All of that work went on...came back in 1984 to plan the discussion, if you like.

All of these sorts of things were thrashed out and eventually agreed upon, so that, what we have now in the province is a process where there are the four levels. The general competencies that are expected to be mastered at each of those levels are identified and there are ongoing articulation, call them - sub-committees. There would be one in mathematics, there would be one in, probably, computer related...computer science related courses, obviously in english and the other general areas of competency. It is through that process that the people involved in that particular area would come together and work out issues in terms of "is this course that we're teaching in college A really the equivalent of this course that seems to be the same that's being taught in college B"? Really what comes out in terms of documentation, is a province wide articulation document that lists all of the offerings by the providers and these are largely college based.

You can see from a learners point of view, if you take course X at college A and you then go to college B and you want to have credit for course X in order that you can take course Y because, maybe, you're prerequisite for the other...that's already identified up front and you know that from the documentation. It's my view that, that process has worked pretty well.

It fits in with the much larger context of articulation in the province because these colleges also offer their first two years of university work so there was a need to work out the articulation there, as well. So, British Columbia, if you like, has a bit of a culture of articulation that's developed over the last 10 or 15 years or so.

**Arthur Bull**

Thanks. I'd like to thank all of you for being here. This has been a learning experience for me, as well. I'm fascinated by the way that this discussion does take us to examine some basic values in adult education and I see this as one of the first steps in a much longer and ongoing discussion. So, again, I'd like to thank the four of you for joining us and helping us in this process.

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